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Floodables

Kayann Short
University of Colorado, retired faculty

KAYANN SHORT

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A week after the flood on Colorado's Front Range, I woke early. My first thought: Are they gone? We'd heard rumors the day before that the barricade behind which our farm was corralled would be moved further west on Highway 66. The barrier had been hastily assembled for the National Guard and Sheriff's deputies to protect our nearby town of Lyons until evacuated residents could return. No one passed without permission or permit. Because our farm borders the highway over which the floodwaters rushed, we were caught behind the checkpoint, even though we had no flood damage and no reason to leave. Despite crops and animals that kept us in place, officials weren't happy we remained.

I dressed quickly and walked down our long driveway toward 66. An absence of traffic on the normally busy highway suggested the barricade remained. My mind raced to the weekend ahead. Our farm is a community supported agricultural farm, or CSA, to which members come weekly to the barn for their produce. If the checkpoint were still in place, how would our members reach us to pick up their vegetable shares?

Although the checkpoint was intended to safeguard Lyons properties, residents had become increasingly frustrated as rules about who could enter and when changed daily. Long lines formed each day as drivers waited for entrance or were turned away. A few days after the flood, we'd been called down to the checkpoint to vouch for friends staying with us temporarily. Because their driver's licenses didn't match our address, the deputies at the barrier would not let them pass.

By the time we got there, angry words had been exchanged and our friends had retreated down a side road now closed for the night. The officer confronting us wasn't happy with the situation. He'd heard enough about who needed to get where and when. "Why don't you people leave?" he yelled. "There's nothing for you here."

I paused to calm my voice. "But that's not true." I shook my head. "We have water. We have power. We have food. We have everything we need."

He stared, surprised. Clearly, this was new information. He must have thought the rural places along the highway had been affected like the town. He didn't know how self-sufficient we are with our generators, propane, septic systems, and gardens, not to mention our general off-grid attitudes.

Without a word, he retreated to find his superior officer. By the time they returned, the situation had eased. They took our friends' names so they could return to our farm; we thanked the deputies for their long hours of work. We knew

they were just doing their jobs, but we'd breathe easier without an armed barricade as a neighbor.

Now I turned onto the highway and looked to the rising sun.

The road was empty as far as I could see. No gates, no guards, no guns. During the night, they'd disappeared. Nothing remained but grey concrete vanishing into the eastern horizon.

"Whoohoo! They're gone!" I yelled, pumping my fist into the air with joy that 66 would be open to our farm again. Then I glanced around. I was glad no one had seen me celebrating in the midst of our town's devastation. The road was clear of the trucks and heavy equipment that had assembled daily near our driveway.
Now they would stage their work closer to Lyons where it was crucially needed.

But the highway wasn't completely bare. In the middle of the road sat a brown paper sack. I'd seen workers handed a similar lunch each morning. I thought about leaving the bag on the highway in case someone returned for it, but I knew that was unlikely once the work of rock and rubble began. A worker would be going without lunch; I hoped someone would share.

Not wanting to leave trash in the middle of the now-open road, I took the bag back to the kitchen without looking inside, forgetting it on the counter until John came in at noon. "What's this?" he asked. Curious to see what some agency had packed for a laborer's lunch, we found a Bumble Bee kit of crackers, tuna, relish, and mayo--and a peppermint; small bags of pretzels, peanuts, and Craisins; pita bread; a pear; and a Twix bar.

As organic farmers, John and I don't each much packaged food, especially of the plastic cubicle variety. Still, someone's hands had prepared this meal and some worker would go without. It didn't seem right to waste food, especially in these post-flood days when thrift seemed a virtue and feeding people was on many of our minds. How relieved we were that the barricade was gone and our members could get to our farm for their vegetables again. We knew we were lucky that floodwaters hadn't ruined our crops. More than ever, food seemed a gift, whether it came directly from the soil or from a brown paper bag in the middle of the road.

John ate the peanuts; I ate the pita, Craisins, and Twix bar. The chickens loved the pretzels. Later, we told friends we'd composted the pear because it wasn't organic. "Like the Twix bar was!" they teased. We've still got the tuna kit. It's our flood take-away that life can change instantly, leaving choices we'd never considered before.

I felt tender after the flood, softened to the land and the altered lives we faced. The landscape had changed, not only geographically by a river outside its bed, but emotionally as we wondered what would be lost and what would be left.

Helping friends pick up debris in the middle of the now dry riverbed near their home, I found a book twisted by water and tumbled upon stones, its pages woven with grass, silt, and leaves like a nest of words washed downstream. I salvaged it, too, another memento of life changing course.

When disaster hits, people have little time to grab what's most important. Loved ones—human and animal--come first; computers, photos, and family heirlooms next. We take what we can to preserve our lives before as we wait for what follows after. But if memories were objects, which would you take as you rushed out the door? I'd take that morning's call to an empty highway: "The barricade's gone--and we're still here."

Farmer, writer, activist, and teacher Kayann Short, Ph.D., is the author of *A Bushel's Worth: An Ecobiography*, a memoir of reunion with a family's farming past and a call to action for farmland preservation today.